

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Case File: AA-83494

AK-040-02-EA-013

Applicant: Alaska Fair Chase Guiding
Larry Benda

**Type of
Action:** Special Recreation Permits (commercial hunting)

Location: The Proposed Action affects the BLM-administered lands within Guide Use Areas 01-01 and 01-02 and 01-03 near Haines, Alaska and more specifically:

Copper River Meridian

T. 26 S., R. 54 E., Section 14

T. 26 S., R. 56 E., Section 4

T. 26 S., R. 56 E., Section 32, excluding Tract A, U.S. Survey 3708, Alaska

T. 26 S., R. 55 E., Section 12, excluding Tract A, U.S. Survey 3708, Alaska

T. 27 S., R. 57 E., Section 35

T. 28 S., R. 59 E., Section 17

T. 28 S., R. 56 E., Section 5, excluding Lot 2, Tract B, U.S. Survey 3708, Alaska

T. 28 S., R. 56 E., Section 35

T. 29 S., R. 57 E., Section 24 excluding Lot 1, Tract C, U.S. Survey 3708, Alaska

T. 30 S., R. 57 E., Section 20 excluding Lot 2, Tract C, U.S. Survey 3708, Alaska

T. 30 S., R. 56 E., Section 2

T. 30 S., R. 55 E., Section 1

**Prepared
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**Preparing
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Date: April 9, 2002

I. INTRODUCTION

This Proposed Action involves commercial guiding use of public lands near Haines, Alaska. Although all of this land has been selected for conveyance by the State of Alaska, BLM is responsible for management until the land is conveyed. Along navigable streams, BLM maintains management authority only for those lands which are above the ordinary high water mark, and the State of Alaska manages land and waters below that mark. For commercial big game hunting guides, authorization will be only for those lands that the operator is authorized to hunt on by the Big Game Commercial Services Board.

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:

Larry Benda, Alaska Fair Chase Guiding, has requested permission to conduct guided big game hunts in the Haines area. The Anchorage Field Office has previously authorized commercial recreation use of BLM-administered lands near Haines within Guide Use Areas 01-01, 01-02, and 01-03. Bart Henderson, Chilkat Guides, AA-61302; Al Gilliam, Alaska Cross Country Guiding (ACCG) and Glacier Valley Tours, AA-61582; and Steve Fossman, Fossman Guiding and Outfitting, AA-78217, have been authorized special recreation use permits within these guide use areas.

This type of service is needed to meet the anticipated public demand for quality guided services which provide safe recreation opportunities in remote or relatively inaccessible locations near Haines, Alaska. This is one of four companies providing such services on BLM-administered lands in this area.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

The BLM has not developed a land use plan for the public lands in the Haines area. However, this environmental analysis assesses the impacts of the Proposed Action and provides a basis for a decision on the proposal (43 CFR 1610.8(b)(1)).

C. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, Policies, Plans or Other Environmental Analyses:

A special recreation permit (SRP) is required for commercial recreation use including big game guiding on public land and water pursuant to 43 CFR 8372 and Handbook H-8372-1. With this regulation, an applicant may be authorized to conduct commercial recreation activities on BLM-administered land. The Authorized Officer may issue SRPs for up to five years subject to annual re-authorization. The permittee must satisfactorily meet the requirements associated with the SRP as well as conform with applicable laws and regulations on all other Federal or State administered lands and waters.

Permits from the State of Alaska are required for all services that derive revenue on State lands starting from the first day of occupancy. The applicant has a State of Alaska Guide-Outfitter license to guide in Areas 01-01, 01-02, and 01-03.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action:

The applicant, Larry Benda, Alaska Fair Chase Guiding, proposes to conduct commercial big game guiding on public land in the Haines area.

The applicant is in his first year of operation in the Haines area within Guide Use Areas 01-01, 01-02, and 01-03. The majority of the requested permitted use includes BLM-administered land and waters in the Takhin Ridge, eastern slope of the Takshanuk Mountains, Upper Chilkat, Upper Chilkoot, Burrow Creek and the Upper Kelsall River valley.

The hunting season for brown and black bear consists of a spring hunt, April/May, and a fall hunt, September through December. The applicant plans on hunts lasting up to 14 days. Most bear hunting will not occur on BLM managed lands. Access to these hunts will be by foot, 4x4 truck, jet boat, or charter of a small plane. On BLM-administered lands, camps will not be set up in advance and will be removed upon departure. Hunting parties will be completely self-sufficient.

The goat hunting season is generally between August 1st and December 31st. Goat hunts will be mostly day trips with possible overnight stays. Access is predominantly by boat, however, some areas have highway access. In either case, a substantial amount of backpacking is required in order to get to the hunting areas. The base camp for the goat hunts will be in the town of Haines. Mr. Benda expects to guide up to five hunters on BLM-administered lands each season.

B. No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would be to deny issuing the necessary recreation permit to conduct commercial big game guiding.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

All of the land described in the Proposed Action has been selected by the State of Alaska as part of its entitlement at statehood. BLM is responsible for management of the land until it is conveyed to the State or the selection is relinquished. Adjacent landowners (State of Alaska) have been made aware of the application and no responses have been received.

A. Critical Elements:

It has been determined that the following Critical Elements of the human environment are either not present or would not be affected by the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative:

Air Quality
Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs)
Cultural/Paleontological Resources
Environmental Justice
Farm Lands (Prime or Unique)
Flood Plains
Invasive, Non-native Plant Species
Native American Religious Concerns
Subsistence
Threatened and Endangered (T&E) Species
Wastes (Hazardous/Solid)
Water Quality (Surface/Ground)
Wetlands/Riparian
Wild and Scenic Rivers
Wilderness

B. Wildlife:

The specific sites and areas proposed for Mr. Benda's use typically have the wide array of habitats found in South East Alaska. Transitional habitats and vegetation communities unique to the area also occur that display mixes of interior Rocky Mountain and coastal rain forest plant assemblages.

Wildlife species most prevalent and obvious include brown and black bear, mountain goats, moose, ptarmigan, blue grouse, trumpeter swan, and a large array of waterfowl, non-game birds, amphibians and mammals. River systems are typically highly productive anadromous salmon streams that support large numbers of bald eagles and other predators including bears.

C. Recreation

Recreation use in the Chilkat River Valley is frequented by recreationists seeking various opportunities. Primarily these include heliskiing, eco-tourism, float boating, power boating, hiking and wildlife viewing. Most recreation use in this area is accessed by road from the Haines Highway. People seeking recreation opportunities in the tributaries to the Chilkat River generally use power boats or aircraft for access. There are no established trail systems within these tributaries, only game trails. Unless guided, most recreationists are local residents. There are opportunities for guided float and power boating on the main Chilkat river, Trisku and Klehini rivers.

D. Socio-economics:

The town of Haines, Alaska, has a seasonal but growing tourism based economy. Retail shops, restaurants, hotels, transportation and tours generate substantial income for the business community and sales tax revenues for the city during the summer months. Active tourism businesses support other sectors of the community through spin-off purchases.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

1. Wildlife:

The impacts to wildlife are habitat damage by vegetative destruction or modification by human uses at or around camp sites. There is a potential for creating "camp bear" problems through unclean campsites. However, previous camp inspections indicate that operators have kept clean camps and have not had any "camp bear" problems to date. Access to remote sites by aircraft and boats may pose short-term noise impacts to wildlife in the immediate area.

2. Recreation:

Larry Benda's use of jet boats along the Tsirku River will contribute additionally to current commercial use by ACCG/Glacier Valley Tours. There is also some subsistence and recreational power boating and rafting on the river. This may be noticeable to other river users both visually and by increased noise levels. However, many of these visitors are there only once in a lifetime and would likely not notice an increase in frequency. The quality of the wilderness experience could decrease, particularly for recreation users that have experienced the area previously.

3. Socio-Economic Impacts:

The Proposed Action will help the local economy by bringing tourism dollars into the Haines area. Some benefit to local government is expected from tax dollars.

B. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

Impacts from the No Action Alternative may reduce the potential positive socio-economic impacts since fewer tourism and recreation dollars would come into the community. There is also a potential loss of recreation opportunities for people desiring access to areas that are otherwise inaccessible to them.

- C. Cumulative Impacts:
Alaska Fair Chase Guiding will add to the noise disturbances and visual intrusions to recreational users in the area surrounding the upper Tsirku river near Cottonwood creek. Also, the increased use of public land by other outfitters will add to these disturbances. Backcountry recreationists seeking solitude and wildlife in the immediate area of the Proposed Action may be pressured to seek these activities in areas with less human disturbance.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

- A. Persons and Agencies Consulted:
Ron Schonenbach - Alaska Dept. of Natural Resources
- B. List of Preparers:
Dave Doucet, Recreation Specialist
Jake Schlapfer, Outdoor Recreation Planner
Donna Redding, Archaeologist
Jeff Denton, Subsistence/Wildlife Biologist
Bruce Seppi, Wildlife Biologist
David Kelley, Surface Compliance Specialist
Kathy Stubbs, Realty